Reviews

Janet Harbord (2016) *Ex-Centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology*. London: Bloomsbury, 272 pp.

If Robert Sinnerbrink says that Giorgio Agamben is "a philosopher only occasionally mentioned in contemporary film-philosophy" (Sinnerbrink 2015: 3), then Janet Harbord makes an important contribution to correcting this oversight. Following hot on the heels of Asbjørn Grønstad's edited collection, *Cinema and Agamben: Ethics, Biopolitics and the Moving Image* (Grønstad 2014), to which Harbord makes an important contribution (Harbord 2014), *Ex-Centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* offers a powerful and sustained application of Agamben's philosophy to cinema, exploring in particular how we can mine cinema's history in order to find new or different potentialities regarding what cinema is, might be, and/or what it can do.

In her introduction, Harbord explains that to be "ex-centric" means "reading the past as effective in the present" (p. 5), especially in the sense that cinema's forgotten histories or could-have-beens can still be felt and still could more forcibly come into being. In this way, cinema must be understood not just as a medium for recording events and fixing them in an eternal state, but also as a medium of transmission, which can bring about change. Indeed, Agamben argues that cinema is concerned less with image than it is with gesture, since gesture is "the name for the harnessing of the collapse of subjectivity and aesthetics, and cinema is the aesthetic space in which this is most possible" (p. 8). That is, read as

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gesture, cinema can be understood as giving to us a sense of that which is not alongside that which is, as per the supposedly crazed ravings of Don Quixote (who, to paraphrase Miguel de Cervantes, felt that the craziest thing of all is to see life as it is and not as it should be). In this way, Harbord proposes that "ex-centric cinema" might be understood as a "non-cinema" (p. 17) that accompanies the more official/institutionalised cinema to which we most commonly are exposed.

Harbord turns her attention in the first chapter to cinematic glitches and incompleteness, especially in relation to the quixotic Orson Welles. She also charts how under the regime of science, human "[e]xperience is discredited as a form of common and transmissible knowledge" (p. 32), with the result being that "desire... becomes essentially insatiable" (p. 33). If you will, an incomplete and fragmented (or human) understanding of the world invites (human) imagination/fantasy to complete it. But since fantasy is no longer considered real, fantasy cannot be fulfilled. With fantasy discredited and unfulfilled, we live in a world without love, but which is defined by fixity and individuality. Cinema in its ex-centric sense, meanwhile, "shows us the waywardness of a desire to grasp and keep anything of the passing moment... What cinema delivers are fragments that may be assembled as partial things" (p. 47).

In Chapter 2, Harbord suggests the importance of tics and spasms as the body becomes coded as opposed to unruly in the modern, capitalist world. Considering Eadweard Muybridge, Harbord suggests that still images are *engrams* that equally privilege transmission over recording (p. 67), with the engram being "a trace of memory encoded and open to future transmission across time, retaining a potential for reactivation within the appropriate conditions" (p. 68). She continues: "[w]hilst the pre-cinematic physiological sequences of photography exhibit a body ostensibly brought under analytical control and made legible, there is always a dimension that escapes this capture" (p. 69), with this dimension often being female. If capital sees, after Roberto Esposito, a shift from community to immunity (people separated from each other and fearing contagion), then this chimes with the development of film grammar as the codification of interiority (point of view, legible/controlled character psychology), even if some, like Jean Epstein, see the human interior as an enigma (p. 77). X-rays, therefore, take their place as another technology/dispositif that has been co-opted into processes of immunity rather than community. Nonetheless, Harbord affirms, gesture, the gag and dancing all retain the potential for developing new communities.

Harbord opens Chapter 3 by looking at Rania Stephan's found footage film, *Les trois disparitions de Soad Hosni* (Lebanon/France, 2011), in which

cinema becomes "an apparatus that functions through what Agamben describes as two transcendental terms provided by montage: to arrest the image (stoppage) and to replay it (repetition), and here resides cinema's ability to deactivate the smooth flow of commodity images" (p. 102). Glitches and the aged image mean that "the commodity is subjected to the registration of its history, to contingency, finitude and decay" (p. 103). Harbord then charts how Agamben's view of pornography has evolved from showing the possibility for community (e.g. via cross-class relationships) to being melancholic (pornography as overwhelmed by manipulated female bodies), before suggesting that the direct look to camera can in pornography be defiant. As a result, "pornography is the site where exhibition value and exchange value unite to exemplify the smooth workings of the machine under the sign of the most fabricated desire. And the returned look is but one more gesture captured by the capitalist sensorium" (p. 121). Gesture under capital is thus commodified, but *Soad Hosni* undermines this process because "the material imperfection of the image renders inoperative the distinction between recording and transmission. In the disclosure of material imperfections, cinema draws attention to itself... The image loses its lustre as commodity, but gains its historical and imperfect dimension" (p. 124).

Chapter 4, which is an experimental chapter made up of 19 fragments, suggests that cinema is akin to a laboratory, or a "mechanism that imposes a separation, a machine for sifting matter into binary form: inside/outside, society/nature, included/excluded" (p. 131). Salvaging the role played in the development of film by Étienne-Jules Marey's assistant, Lucien Bull, who pioneered studies of insect flight, Harbord reminds us how his work necessarily involved looking at intervals and air. And it is in the intervals of cinema that ex-centric cinema can break down the laboratory's binarisms. For example, black leader is "a darkness that refuses semiotic meaning and in this sense it stands for all that is ex-centric, unlived and underdeveloped in cinema" (p. 135).

With Bull in mind, Chapter 5 considers other assistants and helpers, or the Sancho Panzas of film history. Existing beyond cinema, or in the *paracinematic* realm (p. 179), these assistants include Birt Acres and William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, who are not far removed from the crackpot copyists in Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881), and close to Herman Melville's impotent scrivener Bartleby from the 1853 story of the same name. In this way, Harbord invites us to remember cinema's failed inventions and failures, those moments in film history that cinema-as-spectacle has obscured from view: "[t]he spectacle is cinema made sacred and untouchable, purified of its glitches and

stammers. The cinema of the assistants returns the image to the realm of the profane... a profane cinema is one that has been touched and handled, contaminated by human use" (p. 199).

Finally, Chapter 6 returns to x-rays and telescopes, which imaging technologies ask us to peer inside the human, thereby helping to create interiority and the concept of identity (p. 214). Centric cinema is a cinema of control where identity is fixed and "[c]ontingency is lost" (p. 216). Harbord, meanwhile, is invested in aggregating what is beyond cinema and transmitting its potential: "[e]x-centric cinema trains possibility in multiple ways: dormant in the apparatus and texts that exist, as unfinished projects that refuse closure, and as the experiment without truth, which is another way of describing the relation between potentiality and impotentiality" (p. 231). Ex-centric cinema finds power in the impotent, paradoxically in the "*not taking place* of cinema" (p. 226), or in non-cinema (p. 206).

Sparkling with ideas, provocative, and beautifully written, Harbord's is a loving text that invites us not simply to consider the commodified toys that cinema offers up, but also to play with the other materials that accompany cinema, but which often are forgotten and/or left behind. Like an infant playing not with the toy but with the cardboard box in which it came, then, we might thereby discover true play – even if to do so risks profaning the temple of cinema. But by mashing up cinema, new flowers can emerge from the mud. In the new media/mud environment, this may be what is happening anyway. To read *Ex-Centric Cinema*, then, may be a key tool for helping us to understand the previously latent potentialities that are becoming actualised in the contemporary media environment.

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